

REINVENT **YOUR** RELATIONSHIP

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*A Therapist's Insights to
Having the Relationship
You've Always Wanted*

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New York

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INTRODUCTION

Mitch and Gina sit on a couch, snuggled close together. Mitch scrolls through movies on Netflix, while Gina fiddles with her phone, looking for delivery. It's a pleasant moment shared together at home—a rare quiet, relaxed evening in their typically busy and bustling lives. Relaxed, that is, until the dreaded question materializes...

“So what do you want to order for dinner?”

“Doesn't matter to me, babe. Whatever you want works.”

“OK, in that case let's get Thai food.”

“Ugh! Anything BUT Thai food.”

“Well, then you should have SAID ‘whatever you want works, EXCEPT Thai food.’ Gina sits up, pulling away from Mitch, clearly irritated. Mitch sighs—a little too loudly, and Gina definitely notices this. Suddenly the body language of

the couple shifts, becoming defensive. The mood darkens. The tension in the room grows.

“I'm sorry, it's just that we had that for lunch today at the office.”

“Well, I can't be expected to know that. How about the new Italian place?”

“OK, sure, whatever. What do you feel like watching? Oooh, they just added *Saving Private Ryan!*”

“What's wrong with you? That movie is a bloodbath, I don't want to watch that while I'm eating!”

“Oh come on, it's a classic movie! It's practically an art film. It's not like I want to watch *Rambo.*” Gina rolls her eyes.

“Hey, don't roll your eyes at me! God, you ALWAYS do this.”

“Do what? You have no sense of what is appropriate. You wanted to watch a shoot-em-up movie on our honeymoon, for god's sake!”

“Are you EVER going to let that go? Christ, it was YEARS ago, get over it already!”

“Don't tell me how to feel!”

Does this scene seem familiar? Arguments in relationships are common, but often times our ideas, opinions, and desires can be misunderstood. The previous dialogue between Mitch and Gina goes beyond food and movies. They both want to spend time together, but their limited communication, lack of validation, and disappointments from the past get in the way of enjoying time together.

If you're an adult in a relationship with a significant other and are interested in repairing or simply improving your relationship, picking up this book can be the first step to a brighter future. As an adult in a loving relationship as well as a couples' therapist, I know that we all

need help when it comes to solving difficulties and disagreements in our relationship.

Relationships can seem easy and smooth in the beginning. This stage of a relationship only lasts the time necessary to meet a partner and obtain more information about their values, rituals, and priorities. You may find that this person is so special to you that you'll be willing to adapt to his or her ways, or you may grow so annoyed or frustrated that you even question the feelings you may have for them. Either way, all relationships have problems. It's a normal part of life to have differences that can result in conflict. It's our ability to deal with these conflicts or differences that are going to help us be successful (or unsuccessful) in our relationship.

Differences make us unique, as we are all distinct individuals who come from different homes, backgrounds, and sometimes cultures. Often times, these differences appear attractive and seductive. Nonetheless, over time they become the source of conflict. Each of us learns to relate to others within the context of our family or environment, and many times what we have learned in the past is what we grow to expect.

No one person knows everything there is to know about having a relationship or dealing with conflict, but as a professional I can offer tangible, helpful advice—as well as teach you proven techniques and skills that have helped my clients improve or repair their relationships. The information in this book is a combination of theories and techniques that I have learned through school, continuing education, the practice of these theories with my clients, scientific studies, and the results that I have seen in my work with clients—as well as the application in my personal life. I will discuss why we repeatedly get stuck in the same problems, the nature of change, forgiveness, communication, expectations, love, friendship, trust, and the roadblocks that you could face as you work on your relationship, and much more. This book could

help you by increasing your understanding about your difficulties, and teaching you new ways to relate to the one you love.

Before going any further, I want to point out that if you're in an abusive relationship either physically or emotionally, then this book is not for you. The theories and techniques in this book could lead you to be in vulnerable situations that may put you at risk. If you're in an abusive relationship, please, please consider talking to someone about your situation. There is help available, you can start by calling the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1 (800) 799-7233, or going to their website at www.thehotline.org. Keep in mind that your phone and internet use can be monitored by your partner. It can be a difficult and lengthy process to leave an abusive relationship, but it's never too late.

The stories and dialogues of this book are inspired from real people, their names, genders, and circumstances have been changed to protect their identity, but the core issues remain true. If you know someone whose circumstances are similar to what I describe, it's merely a coincidence. Keep in mind that the issues I'll discuss in the remaining of this book are fairly common. I hope that you enjoy, learn, and reflect on the content of this book, but more so that you can use some of these concepts and suggestions, and apply them in your life. If you and your partner are willing, you can reinvent your relationship.



Chapter 1

LOVE & ATTACHMENT

I start this book with the concepts of love and attachment since this is usually where relationships start. Without love, many of the difficulties and challenges we face in life as a couple would quickly erode the relationship. More so, I often encounter confusions about love when working with individuals in long-term relationships. My clients tell me things like: “I’m not in-love with him/her anymore,” “I don’t know if I love my partner the same way,” “I don’t have the same passion about my partner.” You may think some of the same things, because we have an idea of love that is highly influenced by mainstream culture: advertising, movies, TV shows, poems, songs, etc. Unfortunately, these influences create an unrealistic expectation about feelings, desires, and needs in relationships.

If you are in a long term relationship and have noticed that the love you feel for your partner is different from when you first got together, you’re experiencing something absolutely normal that comes

with the changes you encounter as a relationship ages and evolves. Anthropologists and researchers have identified three stages of love in humans (Fisher 1998; 2005): Lust, attraction, and attachment. It's believed that love evolves for mating and reproductive purposes, which allows us to live in long term relationships as we get older. Think about this: as our bodies age, even with the help of erectile dysfunction drugs, estrogen supplements, testosterone therapy, and hip replacements sex is not eternal. Let's examine these stages and their characteristics more closely.

Lust is mainly characterized by the craving for sexual gratification. Think about when you first started dating your partner, and even a kiss could fire up intense sexual feelings and desires. You probably experienced these same feelings with other individuals you dated in the past, even if you did not enter into long-term relationships with them. Individuals experience this desire for sexual gratification without specific selection of a partner, anyone could do. Many times, the drive to seek this sexual gratification is responsible for affairs, confusions about love, commitment, and more importantly unhappiness and self-doubt.

This stage of love is temporary, and it often doesn't last long. It may come and go in your relationship, but it's unfair to you and your partner to expect this stage to be permanent in your relationship. I have seen much doubt and questioning from individuals who seek to maintain this stage. They usually end up moving from one relationship to the next hoping that they can maintain this feeling, inevitably ending the relationship once lust ends—which could range from 6 months to 3 years depending on the individual.

Attraction is characterized by increased energy and focused attention on one or more potential mates, accompanied by feelings of exhilaration, intrusive thinking (obsession-like) about a mate, and the craving for emotional union with this mate or potential mate. When

you're madly in love with someone, the person becomes the center of your world, and they take a special meaning in your life.

The attraction stage helps you be more selective than the earlier lust, since it can be influenced by childhood experiences, cultural forces, and individual choice. This attraction leads you to visualize yourself with your partner in the future, and you may ask yourself "Do we have the same values or goals in life?" or "Are we a good match for a life together?" This stage helps you decide if this person will be a good father or mother for future children, —or life partner if children are not in your future.

Attachment is characterized by the maintenance of close social contact, accompanied by feelings of calm, security, comfort, and emotional union with a mate. Love evolves from lust to attraction, and later to attachment in order to help you focus and concentrate your attention in one partner and tolerate him or her at least long enough to get through child rearing years. This attachment is what most people desire when they think of a long-term relationship. Feeling safe and secure is the motivation.

Love is a complex experience of excitement when things go well, but also of sadness and hurt when things fall apart. Therefore, love can bring great joy or great sorrow to your life. If you're experiencing a hard time in your relationship, you could identify with the pain that relationships can cause. However, your desire and motivation to work on this relationship is probably based on the happiness and joy you once experienced. Some researchers believe that love is not an emotion (Fisher 2006), but a powerful brain system that drives and motivates people to act. Think of what love has motivated you to do in the past and maybe the present. Whether in times of joy or sorrow, it's clear that love can have a great impact on your motivations and influence your actions. More so, studies show that falling in love affects intellectual areas of the brain and triggers the same sensation of euphoria experienced by people when they take cocaine (Ortigue, Bianchi-Demicheli, Patel, Frum, & Lewis 2010). You

may be thinking that his helps to explain a few particularly poor choices from the past.

IS LOVE ENOUGH?

Unfortunately, love is not enough to maintain a relationship. Love can motivate actions or motivate you to work on a relationship, but to maintain a relationship takes two motivated individuals. Have you ever ended a relationship even though you loved that person? Have you been in a relationship with someone who said he or she loved you back, but his or her actions showed something different? Have you been repeatedly hurt by the person who says they love you? Have you ever loved someone who didn't feel the same way about you? These are all instances where love was not enough.

Commitment—defined as a long-term orientation toward a relationship, including intent to persist and feelings of psychological attachment (Wieselquist et al. 1999)—is a major factor in creating enduring long-term relationships. Without commitment, it's easier to move on to find the next “better” partner for you. In fact, scientific studies confirm that human beings are neurologically able to love more than one person at a time (Fisher 2005). Therefore, a strong sense of commitment is needed in long-term relationships. This helps to avoid distractions and urges to act from feelings of lust and attraction towards others than your long-term relationship partner.

Other factors that have been identified in order to secure long-term relationships are cooperation, trust, and loyalty (Beck 1989), and we'll examine each of these and more in detail throughout this book.

PATTERNS OF ATTACHMENT

In my work with couples, I have learned that in relationships the same problems come up over and over again, and many remain stuck in the same problem. These problems can develop in very different situations,

which may seem unrelated for the untrained eye, but are rooted by the need to feel love in the form of attachment to a close person in our lives. Anything can start an argument: a look, an innocent action or lack of action, other people's comments or influence, how a situation is handled, and much more. Consciously or unconsciously, when we point out that our partner is doing or not doing something, we're looking for a response—something to let us know that he or she cares, that they love us, that we're a priority in their life—but often times the response can be disappointing. We all want to be special to another person, to feel important, to be desired, and ultimately to be loved and secure. These needs can lead us to do or say many irrational things such as chase, fight, insult and even bully a partner, which ultimately damages the relationship and decreases the chances of feeling loved and secure. People can easily engage in behaviors that work against their true objectives without even realizing it.

Learning to identify what behaviors are working against our objectives can be difficult because many times we engage in them unconsciously. We learn patterns of interaction through our relationship with caregivers since infancy (Bowlby 1958), which impact our future relationships without even realizing it. There is now an increasing amount of research evidence that suggests adult romantic relationships function in a way similar to infant-caregiver relationships, with some noteworthy exceptions of what may be considered acceptable behaviors for adults (Fraley, 2010). The following is the classification of attachment patterns for adult interactions with loving partners: Secure Attachment, Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment, Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment, and Fearful-Avoidant Attachment (Hazan and Shaver 1987; 1990; 1994). Let's take a look at these in more detail:

Secure Attachment individuals can balance intimacy and independence, and they usually have a positive view of themselves, their partners and their relationships. Unsurprisingly, secure attachment

individuals can have healthier and happier relationships with little effort. These individuals usually have high self-esteem and can trust their partner unless the trust is broken.

Anxious-Preoccupied individuals have a hard time trusting. They desperately want to feel intimacy, and may exhibit intense emotional expressiveness, worrying, and impulsive behaviors in their relationships. They often seek an increased approval from partners, usually leading to a sense of dependency or “neediness”. They have less positive views about themselves and their partners. These individuals are easily stressed in their relationships and may exhibit aggressive behaviors in order to seek responses from partners. They over-analyze their partner’s actions and statements, which leads to assuming their partners’ intentions are untrustworthy. Later they may react impulsively based on their assumptions. I usually see anxious-preoccupied clients in couples due to non-grounded jealousy or insecurities about their relationship.

In my work with anxious-preoccupied individuals I first try to help them identify how their actions affect their partners, since often they have not realized how they can be influencing their feelings of insecurity. I work with them on challenging the irrational thoughts that lead to the distrust (you can learn more about challenging irrational thoughts in Chapter 7), since many times their patterns of thinking are creating feelings which may not be based in any real evidence. If there is any factual evidence that could be worrisome about a partner’s commitment to the relationship, I would urge them to specifically identify their partner’s behaviors that lead to the perceived mistrust. I also stress fostering more effective communication to let their partners know how their actions are triggering their insecurities and possibly recruit the partner’s help. It’s common that after years of being accused of being distrustful, partners start to purposely hide information or lie in order to avoid emotional or explosive confrontations. The hiding and lying can create more reasons to be

distrustful, thereby creating an ongoing negative cycle of interaction that feeds itself. We’ll look at common negative cycles of interaction in the next chapter.

Dismissive-Avoidant individuals aspire to a high level of independence, and may even appear to avoid attachment or closeness altogether. These individuals perceive themselves as self-sufficient and not needing close relationships. They suppress their feelings, and deal with rejection by distancing themselves from partners of whom they usually have a poor opinion. Dismissive-avoidant individuals tend to avoid arguments since “it’s a waste of time,” communicating contempt towards their partner. Dismissive-avoidant individuals usually come into therapy because their partner forces them, since they would prefer to avoid talking about their feelings or addressing any conflicts in their relationships.

With dismissive-avoidant individuals, developing empathy is crucial. By putting themselves in their partner’s shoes they could become more empathetic towards their partner. Many times, accessing a situation from a different perspective can do a lot for the understanding of a problem. Simply recognizing the importance of a partner and the role they play in their life can help the dismissive-avoidant individual challenge the belief that they do not need a close relationship. Exploring feelings that come along with having a close relationship can also help them gain insight into how great it can feel to have someone special in our lives.

Fearful-avoidant individuals go back and forward about their feelings towards close relationships, both desiring closeness and feeling uncomfortable with it. They often have difficulty trusting their partners and see themselves as unworthy. They may avoid intimacy and suppress their feelings. Typically these individuals rarely trust their partners, and their insecurities stem from low self-worth and low self esteem. They rarely take risks or try new approaches towards their partners. Many will

avoid confronting problems for fear of losing their partners. As well, if they take the risk to trust and are let down, this can become an impactful event, which will only reinforce their existing fears.

When working with fearful-avoidant individuals I try to help them identify the fear hiding behind their avoidance, since they're usually not aware of it. Most people do not like to admit that they are afraid, therefore fear can be called many different names such as stress, preoccupation, worry, dread, anxiety, discomfort, and much more. Talking about fears can be a challenge for many, especially if they are working hard to suppress it. Part of the work towards meaningful change can be to help someone feel comfortable expressing their fears about closeness, in an effort to communicate it to their partners.

After learning about the different relational patterns, you can see how if we combine these traits it can be pretty difficult for people to relate to one another. Imagine how a couple made up from a dismissive-avoidant individual and a fearful-avoidant individual, could solve any difficulties. If they're both trying to avoid each other and suppress their feelings, how can anything be addressed in a meaningful way? Here is an example of what their interactions can be like:

Patty (fearful-avoidant): You have been working a lot lately. We don't spend time together anymore.

Henry (dismissive-avoidant): I'm tired. I'm too stressed out about work. I don't have it in me.

Patty: Never mind, I can have fun alone. I shouldn't wait for you. I don't need you.

Henry: Are you going to start again? Why can't you just let me be? I'm not as needy as you are.

Patty: No worries, I won't ask you again.

Henry: That's what you always say, but you can't stick to it can you?

Patty: I don't even know why I keep trying, you just don't care.

Of course, we all share small traits of all of the previous classifications, but more often than not we may find our behavior gradually falling under one of them. Remember, these relating behaviors are usually learned at an early age and are mostly unconscious—we aren't doing them on purpose. Our brain is programmed to work this way when interacting with other important people in our lives, since these may apply not only to our partner, but also to close friends, family members, children, and more. The first step to change is to identify that this is happening. Once you accept that it's a problem in your life you can take steps to make things different. Change is not an easy process, but it is possible. With determination and commitment you can learn new ways to relate to others close to you. Because change is a difficult process, many seek therapeutic help, but it may not be necessary. Learning more effective ways to communicate your emotions can be useful if you're trying to alter a negative pattern of interaction. We'll focus on communication techniques in Chapter 4, so you can learn and apply new techniques and see what kind of results you can get.

By implementing the suggestions and techniques that I will cover in the following chapters, I am confident you can achieve positive results in your own relationship. However, if these are too difficult you can consider talking to a professional to help you and guide you through your efforts to make changes in your life.

EXERCISE

The following are questions to help you identify the effect that your relating behavioral patterns have on your relationship. Being honest with yourself is important, so think through and answer the following questions as truthfully as possible:

1. Do you become overly emotional when seeking answers from your partner? If yes, what is your partner's reaction?
2. Do you have a hard time trusting your partner? If yes, do you have factual evidence of this?
3. Do you shut down and avoid your partner? If yes, what do you think your partner feels when you avoid her/him?
4. What do you think your partner wants/expect from you?
5. Are you avoiding your partner because you're worried about his/her reactions?
6. What would happen if your partner knew how you *really* felt about your relationship?
7. What pattern of interaction best fit your relational pattern?
8. What is your objective when you approach/avoid your partner?
9. Did you get the results you expect?

Answering these questions can help you gain some insight into how your actions can be working against your objective to feel safe, secure, and connected in your relationship.



Chapter 2 BEING STUCK & MOVING TOWARD CHANGE

*"When we are no longer able to change a situation —
we are challenged to change ourselves."*

—Viktor E. Frankl

How do we go from being happily in love to being stuck in a miserable relationship? First, the period of lust and attraction ends, and we end up with individuals who have different attachment needs than ours. Many times, at this point in the relationships major investments in life have been made with a partner, and there are common interests such as children, property, and more. Routine also sets in, and it starts to look like much of the same. If conflict becomes the routine, and tension floats around, it's more likely the couple is questioning their involvement, saying mean things to each other (or thinking them) or starting to wonder if it's worth the effort. Many may